SOMETHING OLD - SOMETHING NEW
Mark 2:18-22
February 25, 1979

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

The cartoon which appeared on the first page of the lead article in Time Magazine this week caught my eye. President Carter is at his desk in the Oval Office, flanked by the Stars and Stripes and Harry Truman's "The Buck Stops Here" sign. Off to one side is the large world globe which is always in the background of pictures of the Oval Office - broken apart, shattered, chunks of it strewn on the floor. That cartoon caught the mood of the moment, I thought. The world feels like it is coming apart at the seams, literally.

If you still have the courage to keep abreast of the news you have felt something akin to what the philosophers call "angst", or existential dread, recently. The ominous confrontation in Southeast Asia between China and Vietnam and the spectre of a larger confrontation between the Soviet Union and China makes us understandably nervous. The total upheaval in Iran along with the thinly veiled hostility toward all things American increased our anxiety. The kidnapping and murder of an Ambassador and the subsequent lecture on foreign policy delivered by the Mexican President - publically - to our President - all of that, within a several week period conspired, it seems, to loosen the mortar which holds our neat, tidy, predictable world together.

And behind those public and political concerns, we find ourselves living in a culture where the only thing stable is the probability of change. We are forced to deal with the fact of our national vulnerability: having been weened on the idea of American invincibility, we now are dealing with the end of that idea. We are forced to cope with internal changes - such as the altering sexual roles, and a new and frightening sexual morality. The referee at my son's basketball game last week was a woman and the middle-aged fathers present, a chauvinistic bunch, had a problem - how to boo a petite, twenty-four year old woman. Sometime in the second quarter we learned how to do it. And if you want a real shock to your traditional sensibilities, observe the coeducational openness of any dormitory on any American college campus.

All in all it's a frightening time to be alive. A modern theologian has described the 1970's as the "end of the stable state"; the time when all the truths of the past are under question; all the nailed-down verities are coming loose and "blowin' in the wind" of radical social change. Mr. Carter's broken globe is a meaningful symbol for all of us.

It is never easy to live with instability - rapid change. Those pillars of First Century Judaic culture, the Pharisees, must have felt the same way when they encountered Jesus of Nazareth. They saw in Him a threat to their stable state of affairs. He simply didn't take very seriously those customs which they thought were the adhesive which kept their neat little world glued together. They kept sounding like Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof", hanging onto "tradition" for dear life. Tradition is the organizing principle of life. Do you remember that marvelous moment when he sings....

> "Tradition, tradition...Who, day and night must scramble for a living? Feed a wife and children, Say his daily prayers? And who has the right as master of the house to have the final word at home? The papa...Tradition...Who must know the way to make a proper home, A quiet home, a kosher home? Who must raise a family and run the home So papa's free to read the holy book? The mama...Tradition."

The Mosaic Law prescribed fasting on one day of the year, the Day of Atonement.

But by Jesus' day it had become traditional for the very pious to fast much more frequently than that. In fact, the most devout men were fasting twice a week. People assumed that fasting was a good thing to do. Among the more vigorous fasters were the Pharisees and the followers of John the Baptist. So, someone raised the question - "Why are the Pharisees and John's disciples fasting, Jesus, but your disciples are not?" Elsewhere they would ask Him why His disciples ate with unwashed hands, why He broke bread with sinners, why they flouted the Sabbath customs. All of it is a variation on a very familiar theme - "By what right do you break tradition?"

That was the situation to which Jesus addressed three marvelous little parables:
- you don't fast while the bridegroom is present
- you don't patch an old garment with a piece of new cloth
- you don't pour new wine into old wine skins

The first of those parables tells us a lot about religious style, a la Jesus. It isn't morose, sad, sober. In fact, if you know how good the news is your religious observances are going to look and feel like a party, a real celebration.

In the second and third parables, Jesus says something very provocative about the new and the old, about new truth and traditional custom.

He had watched His mother patching His own garments. He knew that if you wanted to patch a hole in an old pair of britches you had to use old cloth. If new material was used it would shrink whenever the garment was washed, and the original hole would be made bigger.

He had seen how wine was stored. The fermentation process contined for a while after new wine was declared suitable for drinking. One of the products of the process is gas. If you put new wine into old skins - skins that are no longer elastic, the pressure will cause them to break. He had seen it happen many times. New wine is put into new skins. Old wine is put into old skins.

Jesus was telling His contemporaries that their traditions had become too important. The wineskins exist for the sake of the wine. The wine is what you want to preserve and protect. In matters religious it is God, His will and truth and holy law, that matters, not the particular forms of the religion itself. Pharisaic Judaism of the First Century had forgotten that. The customs and rituals and traditions of religion had become more important than their original intent. Religion had become an end in itself.

The Word of God here, I think, is quite plain. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is dynamic, alive. It cannot be contained in anybody's favorite customs and traditions. The Gospel transcends the very religious forms it has inspired: it measures and judges the customs it has stimulated. It is always slightly at war with institutional religion, the very nature of which is to want to nail down once and for all that which can never be nailed down permanently. It judges us when our loyalty to Protestantism or Roman Catholicism or Presbyterianism or Lutheranism becomes more important than our loyalty to Jesus Christ.

The Word here is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ may often be in tension, as well, with those truths secular society regards as traditional.

The Gospel stretched the traditional way of thinking about slavery, and later

about the inherent equality of every man and woman - and today much of the ferment for new ways of thinking about the role of women, international relations, hunger and a myriad of other concerns is coming at the instigation of Christian people.

The Word here is that this is the nature of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is new wine. When Christians question the effectiveness and faithfulness of traditional moral standards, for instance, they aren't being radical and irresponsibly liberal. In fact, they're doing exactly what their Lord did. When Christians advocate a whole new way of thinking about national security and the arms race, they are being very faithful to their Lord. When churches discuss alternate life styles as a response to the ecological crisis, and point the finger of judgment at a culture that simply refuses to acknowledge its complicity in the rape of the ecosystem - those churches are faithful to their Lord Jesus Christ.

The Gospel is New Wine in every age. And yet it is less than honest to portray Jesus as a revolutionary and an enemy of all tradition. In Luke's version of this series of parables there is an intriguing sentence which some scholars believe was added later, but which I choose to believe Jesus said: "No one after drinking old wine desires new: for he says 'The old is good.'" That sheds a whole new light on the matter. You don't put new wine in old skins. But that fact doesn't alter another fact which everybody knows - old wine is better than new wine. Just because old wineskins have lost some elasticity doesn't mean they're good for nothing. In fact, their purpose is an important one: they're what you store old wine in - until you need it for an important occasion.

The opposite of a culture imprisoned by its own traditions is one floating around loose, with no roots. The opposite of a religion completely entrapped in its own rituals and customs is one which acknowledges no past, celebrates no history and therefore has about as much vitality as a bunch of cut flowers. Sociologists are concerned that the "Me generation" - the generation obsessed with instant gratification - may forget that there are enduring truths which are passed down from generation to generation. Arnold Toynbee taught that "civilization consists of commonly held values...and is possible only because of great affection of people for old ways and old values."

The experience of Roots II reminded us again of the importance of the past and the absolute necessity of celebrating some kind of past if we are to have identity in the present. Who is not moved by Alex Haley's marvelous discovery of that "old African" - Kunta Kinte?

You simply can't force Jesus into a mold called "revolutionary". He didn't advise discarding the old wine skins. He did not deny His own history. He simply taught that some truth is new - and won't fit in the old containers.

There are times in history when that is more evident than others. The colonial period in our own history, for instance. Old structures could not be patched up to contain the new doctrine of liberty. Fortunately the founding fathers were concerned enough about the wine, and not the wine skins, that after a dozen years they threw away one structure, called another convention and wrote a new federal Constitution.

The 1860's was another such time. Men of good will tried valiantly to patch up an old garment - but it wouldn't hold. It was time for preserving the old by creating something new: a new nation, without slavery.

We seem to be living in another such time today: a time that demands fresh new approaches, new ideas, new structures - to cope with a new world.

It is, almost everyone agrees, a very critical time for the Christian Church. The Church, as is the case with all institutions, has a propensity for looking backwards, in the metaphor of one critic, "driving blindly into the future with its eyes locked on the rear view mirror." The Church, as was the case with Judaism of Jesus' day, is often guilty of preserving the wine skins, forgetting that its business is the new wine of the Gospel.

That propensity shows itself in many ways: in an inclination to enshrine local custom long after the custom is relevant. The "Seven last words of the Church" someone said recently will be "We Never Did It That Way Before". And Martin Marty writes: "I believe this thesis to be defensible, that ordinarily Christian people produce institutional forms in each century which are well adapted to the needs and occasions of the previous century." (What's Ahead for the Churches?, p.11).

The result is that none really expects the Church to be relevant. Religion is regarded as very peripheral activity - having little if anything to do with the realities of life. Churches become museums not because governments clamp down on religion - but because the religion in those churches had nothing to do with life.

In a scathing attack on the contemporary church John R. Fry cites a character out of Joseph Heller's book, Something Happened, as typical of the new American - "He doesn't give a damn about Christianity, and he doesn't give a damn about not giving a damn. True, he's nominally a Christian and goes to church now and then, but he goes just to humor his wife. Afterward he teases her about her preacher and the inanity of going to church...American Christians have given up on the Christian enterprise. They are not angry...above all they're bored." (The Great Apostolic Blunder Machine, p.1-2).

This, or any church, cannot afford to look back. We deny our faith - our Lord, when we keep insisting that the wine skins are sacred; that our way of doing things is the once-and-for-all way: that whatever else happens, traditions will not change.

A new and frightening world requires a faith big enough and secure enough to be fresh, aggressive, innovative, new, relevant - without denying the validity of its past. Our brave new world needs a church willing also to be new: to lay down worn out structures and to create new ones.

It's not easy. In point of fact, many of us look to religion, and religious institutions, for the stability so totally absent from the rest of life. But we dare not force our church - our faith - to become our security blanket.

James Russell Lowell wrote a poem in 1844 - This Present Crisis. Part of it has become a fine hymn, the words to which I kept recalling as I thought about this sermon. I looked up the poem and read it in its entirety: it is magnificent. Lowell felt as if his world too was coming apart at the seams. Listen to his words -

"New occasions teach new duties: Time
makes ancient good uncouth.
They must upward still, and onward, who
would keep abreast of truth:
Lo, before us gleam her campfires! We
ourselves must Pilgrims be,
Launch our Mayflower, and steer boldly
through the desperate winter sea,
Nor attempt the Future's portal with the
Past's blood rusted key."

(Complete Poetical Words, p.67-68).

God calls His people into the future. He calls us to be His people, unafraid to think new thoughts, to assume new duties.

In Jesus Christ God has called each of us, personally. That call is always to conversion. By that the New Testament does not mean an emotional spasm: it means a turning around, deliberately: a willingness to think new thoughts and walk new roads. Christianity is not simply a set of spiritual calisthenics designed to make you stronger. It is an invitation to become a new man or woman. The promise is that into the old veneer of our lives God will pour something brand new: something new and exciting and fresh, full of goodness and truth. It is called salvation.

Almighty God, you create all things anew. So recreate us. Give us grace to live, not in the past, but fully in this present. Give us courage to live unafraid; to face our future in the full confidence of Your love. Save us, Father, from the boredom of our own making: through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.